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ABSTRACT

Neither the hopes nor the fears of vouchers and charter schools, two programs proposed to reform education, have been realized. Many key questions remain unanswered. This research brief describes the work done by the authors of a larger work, "Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools," in addressing the key questions. The brief describes five basic dimensions of the educational system and outlines current findings on vouchers and charter schools along these dimensions: academic achievement, choice, access, integration, and civic socialization. Reflecting the conclusions of the larger work, the brief states that further research is needed before there can be any definitive answers about the effectiveness of vouchers and charter schools on improving the education system. The brief also includes a short list of recommendations for policymakers who seek to maximize the benefits and minimize the harm associated with vouchers and charter programs. The recommendations include the following: (1) all participating schools should practice open admissions; (2) policymakers should provide generous funding; and (3) program designers should include existing schools. (WFA)

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RAND Research Brief

EDUCATION

What Do We Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools?

SEPARATING THE RHETORIC FROM THE REALITY

Two prominent reforms proposed to improve education are the use of "vouchers"—publicly funded scholarships that students may use for private-school tuition—and the creation of "charter schools"—schools of choice that are funded by public money but operate autonomously, outside the traditional system of public-school governance. Vouchers and charter schools both represent the leading edge of the movement to promote parental choice in education, and they present similar challenges for the traditional system of government-operated schools. Supporters of these proposals have great hopes that the proposals will provide significant benefits for the education of the nation's children, and opponents have large fears about what the proposals will do. In *Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools*, Brian Gill, Michael Timpane, Karen Ross, and Dominic Brewer conclude that neither the hopes nor the fears have yet been realized and that many key questions remain unanswered.

The authors examine available evidence on vouchers and charter schools on five dimensions that represent the basic goals of the educational system:

- Academic achievement, including not only effects on the achievement of students in voucher and charter schools but also effects on the achievement of students remaining in conventional public schools.
- Choice, including the demand for vouchers and charter schools and the supply of schooling options available.
- Access, specifically whether vouchers and charter schools will be available to low-income, minority, and special-needs students.
- Integration, that is, whether vouchers and charter schools will increase or reduce racial and ethnic integration of students across and within schools.
- Civic socialization, that is, whether voucher and charter schools will help form responsible and active citizens.

While further research and experimentation are needed to fully assess vouchers and charter schools along these dimensions, the available evidence points to several considerations for policymakers who are designing such programs.

WHAT IS KNOWN AND WHAT IS NOT KNOWN

The authors find that many of the important empirical questions about voucher and charter schools have not been answered, and because most of these programs have been operating for only a short time, none of these questions has been answered definitively. Current findings include the following:

Academic achievement. Small experimental, privately funded voucher programs suggest that African-American students may receive a modest achievement benefit after one or two years in the programs (Figure 1). The exact reasons for this benefit, however, remain unknown. Children of other racial groups in voucher schools have shown no consistent evidence of academic benefit or harm.

Charter-school achievement results are mixed. In Arizona, charter schools seem to be outperforming conventional public schools in reading and possibly in math. In Texas, charter schools that focus specifically on students at risk for poor academic performance show an achievement advantage over conventional public schools, but other charter schools perform slightly worse than conventional public schools. An examination of newly opened charter schools in Michigan indicates no difference from conventional public schools in terms of achievement effects in one tested grade (grade 7), while conventional public schools outperform charters in the other tested grade (grade 4). Meanwhile, the studies in both Arizona

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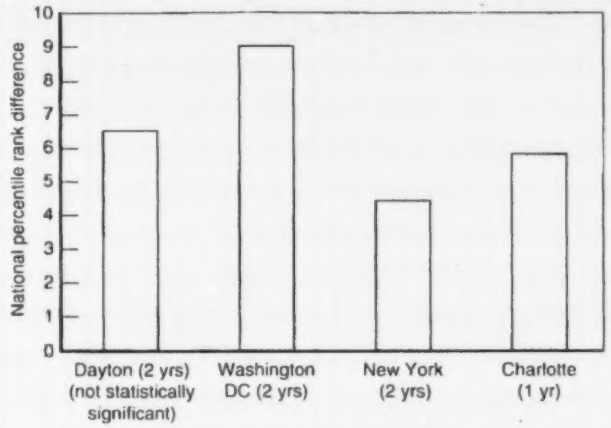


SOURCES: David Myers et al., 2000, *School Choice in New York City After Two Years: An Evaluation of the School Choice Scholarship Program*, Washington: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.; William G. Howell et al., 2000, "Test-Score Effects of School Vouchers in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, and Washington DC: Evidence from Randomized Field Trials," paper given at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington.

Figure 1—Average Composite Percentile Score Advantage for African-American Voucher Students over an African-American Control Group

and Texas suggest that achievement effects in charter schools improve after the first year of operation.

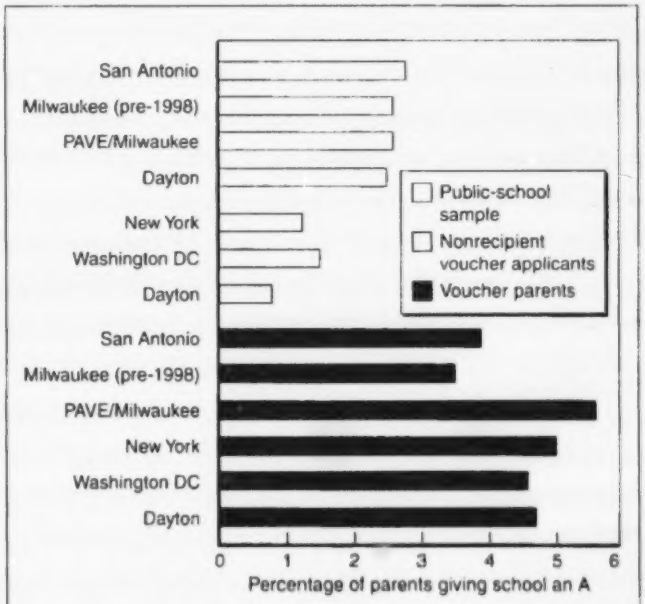
The long-term effects of voucher and charter programs remain unknown. And perhaps the most important unknown is how voucher and charter programs will affect the achievement of the large majority of students who remain in conventional public schools. Either positive or negative effects are theoretically possible, but to date there is no good evidence on this crucial issue.

Choice. For a variety of reasons, of which academic achievement is but one, large numbers of parents want the choices that voucher and charter programs afford. In virtually all the voucher and charter programs studied, parents report high satisfaction with their children's schools (Figure 2 shows voucher results). It is unknown, however, whether voucher and charter programs can be scaled up to provide a range of desirable choices for large numbers of families.

Access. Some targeted programs with income qualifications have placed low-income, low-achieving, and minority students in voucher schools. Most choice programs, however, whether voucher or charter, have done less well in extending access to students with disabilities or with poorly educated parents. Programs that subsidize private-school tuition via income-tax benefits favor middle- and upper-income families.

Integration. In highly segregated communities, targeted voucher programs may modestly increase racial integration by placing minority children into voucher schools that have a smaller proportion of minority students. Limited evidence suggests that most charter schools have racial distributions that fall within the range of distributions of local public schools. Evidence from other nations, however, suggests that large-scale unregulated choice programs would likely lead to greater stratification. Studies of existing U.S. voucher and charter programs (which are usually regulated rather than unregulated) have lacked sufficient data to provide definitive answers about the effects of the programs on integration. Dynamic analyses that consider both the schools students attend and the schools they would likely attend in the absence of such programs are needed.

Civic socialization. Almost no research has investigated the effects of voucher and charter schools on civic socialization. The few studies that compare civic socialization in public and private schools provide limited evidence that is suggestive of what might be achieved in voucher and charter programs, namely, that existing private schools are not, on average, any worse than public schools at socializing citizens.



SOURCES: William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, 2000, *School Choice in Dayton, Ohio: An Evaluation After One Year*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance; Janet R. Beales and Maureen Wahl, 1995, "Private Vouchers in Milwaukee: The PAVE Program," in *Private Vouchers*, Terry M. Moe, ed., Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press; Paul E. Peterson, David Myers, and William G. Howell, 1999, *An Evaluation of the Horizon Scholarship Program in the Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas: The First Year*, Cambridge, Mass.: Mathematica Policy Research and Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance.

Figure 2—Parental Ratings of Their Children's Schools in Several Voucher Communities

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Most of the available evidence on voucher and charter schools comes from relatively small programs. The implications of this evidence for larger programs are unclear. Larger programs might exacerbate the weaknesses and fail to produce the benefits seen in small-scale programs, or they might produce systemic benefits that are achievable only on a large scale. More research is needed to determine the effects of variations in the scale of voucher and charter programs.

More generally, the specifics of policy design are likely to have large effects: Not all voucher and charter programs are alike, and different programs will produce different outcomes. *Rhetoric Versus Reality* offers recommendations for policymakers who seek to maximize the benefits and minimize the harm associated with voucher and charter programs. These recommendations include the following:

- To ensure that voucher and charter programs will be academically effective, program designers should include existing private schools, enforce requirements for student achievement testing, and actively inform parents about schools and their effectiveness. Some of the most favorable evidence comes from programs that include existing schools rather than relying largely on new startups. School choice is also more likely to be effective if parents have complete information about school quality.
- To ensure that voucher and charter programs benefit the students who remain in conventional public schools, policymakers should require that all participating schools practice open admissions to prevent "cream skimming" of the best students into elite schools. They should also encourage the performance of conventional public schools by giving them the autonomy they need to perform in a newly competitive educational market.
- To ensure that voucher and charter schools serve low-income and special-needs students, policymakers should require open admissions, provide generous funding (including supplemental funding for students with special needs), and target specific students. Moreover, choice programs should be funded through direct grants rather than income-tax subsidies, which favor middle- and upper-income families.

Some tradeoffs between desired outcomes may be necessary. Admission regulations, for example, may ensure equitable access but may also reduce the number of schools willing to participate in voucher or charter programs. Fortunately, value tradeoffs are not always necessary; a single policy recommendation may serve several purposes. Allowing existing private schools to participate in voucher and charter programs, for example, may promote not only academic achievement but also racial/ethnic integration and the supply of schools available for families to choose among.

The available evidence on voucher and charter programs does not provide a final judgment about their value. At the current scale of such programs, many questions cannot be answered, and some questions that can be answered, such as those related to integration and civic socialization, have not been adequately researched. The final analysis of voucher and charter programs will await more rigorous research and experimentation.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done within RAND Education and documented in Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools, *by Brian P. Gill, P. Michael Timpane, Karen E. Ross, and Dominic J. Brewer, MR-1118-EDU, 2001, 266 pp., $15.00, ISBN: 0-8330-2765-4, available from RAND Distribution Services, Telephone: 310-451-7002; FAX: 310-451-6915; or email: order@rand.org. Building on more than 25 years of research and evaluation work, RAND Education has as its mission the improvement of educational policy and practice in formal and informal settings from early childhood on. A profile of RAND Education, abstracts of its publications, and ordering information may be viewed at www.rand.org. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve public policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.*

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